

Smallpox: Protecting Pets and Other Animals

Can pets get smallpox?

No, animals do not get smallpox and there is no vaccination for animals. Some pets however, may be susceptible to the vaccinia virus used in the smallpox vaccine.

What is vaccinia virus?

The smallpox vaccine does not contain the smallpox virus. It contains a related virus named “vaccinia.” Following smallpox vaccination, the fluid and scab at the vaccine site contains live vaccinia virus that may be contagious to other people and possibly animals for up to three weeks, or until the site is completely healed and the scab has fallen off.

Can vaccinia virus be transmitted to animals following smallpox vaccination?

We are not aware of any documented cases of pets (such as cats or dogs) acquiring vaccinia virus from humans vaccinated for smallpox using the vaccinia virus vaccine. However, given the range of animals that can be infected with vaccinia virus we can assume they could be infected. Care should be taken to minimize exposing animals to the vaccinia virus after smallpox vaccination.

Which animals can get vaccinia virus infection?

There is very little information about which animals can get vaccinia infection following smallpox vaccination. Limited information suggests that rodents, and cattle have been infected. Different types of animals have varying risks of illness from exposure to vaccinia virus. Special precautions should be taken around any animal following smallpox vaccination until you are no longer contagious.

In the case of farm animals, the risk is also low if the vaccination site is properly handled and good hygiene is practiced. The risk to milking cows is likewise low because the dairy industry is highly automated and cows are milked by machine. If there is a concern about proper care of the vaccination site or proper hand hygiene, then recently vaccinated humans need to avoid milking cows until their scab is detached.

What can I do to prevent my pet from getting exposed to vaccinia virus?

Vaccinia virus is transmitted by direct contact with infected material, e.g. the vaccination site, hands contaminated from the vaccination site, bandages from the vaccination, etc. Proper handling of the vaccine site (covering the vaccination site with a bandage and wearing long clothing over the bandage) and good hand hygiene will prevent secondary transmission among human household members and is also sufficient to prevent transmission of vaccine vaccinia virus to household pets. To avoid transmission to a pet:

- Do not let animals sniff or have any direct contact with your vaccination site or the bandages, clothing, sheets, or other items that have been in direct contact with the site.



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- Keep pets out of the room when you are changing bandages, clothes, towels, or sheets.
- Before allowing your pet back into the room after you have changed your bandage, handle and dispose of all contaminated materials safely:
 - Place used bandages and gauze in a plastic zipper bag before throwing them away. You should do the same with your scab when it falls off.
 - Cover trash containers tightly, and take them to an area that is inaccessible to pets and rodents.
 - Use normal laundering (hot water with bleach and detergent) to wash clothing, towels or sheets that have touched the vaccination site.
- Wash your hands after touching the vaccination site or items that have touched the site, such as bandages or clothing.
- Wash your hands after touching the vaccination site and before touching anything else, including your eyes, skin, or pets.
- People who care for livestock should wear long-sleeved clothing and wash their hands before milking, having contact with animals, or equipment such as bridles and buckets.

What should I do if I think my pet has been exposed or is ill?

If your animal has any unusual symptoms and you think it could have been exposed to the vaccinia virus accidentally, please call your veterinarian and notify your local health department.

Adapted from the Washington Department of Health

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